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Study Reveals Foulups in POW Raid

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A new study of the controversial attempt by U.S. commandos to rescue American prisoners from a North Vietnamese POW camp in 1970 says the raid took place despite high-level intelligence reports that the prisoners were considered near-certain evidence the prisoners had been moved elsewhere.

In the end, the study says, U.S. planners decided to go ahead on the chance that the prisoners had been moved back to the camp.

The independent study, based in part on after-action reports and intelligence documents, also reveals at:

- One U.S. commando team landed at the wrong place during the raid—right in the middle of a compound of armed Chinese technicians who were assigned to teach air defense tactics to the North Vietnamese. U.S. officials had thought the compound was a secondary school. The Americans killed about 200 of the Chinese, an incident U.S. officials feared would jeopardize the Washington-Peking "thaw" just beginning. Fifty-five North Vietnamese soldiers were killed; 10 Americans were killed.

- The prisoners had been moved from the POW camp because a secret U.S. cloud-seeding operation in Laos had drastically increased rainfall in the area. The river near the camp had risen so much that the North Vietnamese feared the camp would be flooded and moved the prisoners to a camp near Hanoi.

- The American raiders never were told of the intelligence reports on movement of the prisoners.

- Although the raid generally was considered a failure, U.S. officials consider it a success. The North Vietnamese subsequently moved all prisoners to a central location, a move that strengthened U.S. POW organization. Further, maltreatment of American captives virtually ceased.

- Although Central Intelligence Agency officials claimed in 1970 that they had not had anything to do with the raid, they were in fact directly involved in the planning, including the construction of a \$60,000 model of the prison camp.

The study was prepared by Benjamin Schemmer, a former Pentagon official who is editor of the Armed Forces Journal, a monthly publication that reports and analyzes Pentagon developments. His study is being published today as a book, entitled "The Raid," by Harper and Row.

Schemmer's study is the first detailed look into the daring raid by 59 U.S. Special Forces (Green Beret) soldiers against the Son Tay prison camp 23 miles west of Hanoi on the night of Nov. 21, 1970. The raid, personally approved by President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, then his national security adviser, was designed to rescue 70 American POWs being held at the camp, one of six installations around Hanoi where nearly 400 U.S. prisoners were being held.

Planning for the raid began in early 1970 after reports that the North Vietnamese were torturing American prisoners. A small group of American prisoners released in 1969 had told U.S. officials all prisoners were tortured to force them to divulge military information and sign statements condemning the bombing of North Vietnam. At least a dozen prisoners reportedly had become insane because of the torture, and others had been killed. After Pentagon officials had given Nixon proof in early 1970 that three Americans recently had been tortured to death, the study says, he approved a raid to rescue at least some of the prisoners despite misgivings about a possible adverse political reaction.

Son Tay, selected because of its relative isolation and distance from nearby North Vietnamese military units, was subjected to sophisticated reconnaissance, including "Buffalo Hunter" drones and SR-71 spy planes. U.S. prisoners in the camp indicated their awareness of the reconnaissance activity by arranging their outside laundry in code, and when digging a well, arranging stones in a Morse code signaling a request for "SAR" (search and rescue).

While preparations for the raid, called Operation Kingpin, were under way, there were several serious foul-ups, Schemmer says. One was the covert cloud-seeding operation in Laos designed to render roads on the Ho Chi Minh Trail impassable. The raid planners were not told of the rainmaking operation.

More seriously, 24 hours before the raid, a senior North Vietnamese official, in contact with a neutral diplomat in Hanoi, gave the man—who was providing information to U.S. intelligence—a package of cigarettes before a flight home. The gift was unusual, since the diplomat did not smoke. The package, turned over to U.S. intelligence, contained a coded list of POW camps in North Vietnam, and the number of prisoners they held. The list was interpreted as a diplomatic signal designed to alleviate American fears over the fate of the prisoners. Son Tay was not listed, almost certain evidence, intelligence officials felt, that the camp had been evacuated.